

Highway of Death

by

Misha

THE HIGHWAY OF DEATH

The team of Military Police Soldiers departed from their encampment a few miles from Highway 8 in southern Iraq. They were well rested and fed, although they lacked some niceties like nicotine and caffeine. For a week they had toiled, pushing forward with the armored column of the 24th Mechanized Infantry Division, providing security for the engineers of the 20th Engineer Brigade (Airborne) who were hot on the heels of the tanks and Bradleys in the van of the assault, building a road to the Euphrates. The engineers pushed the road out of virgin desert toward river at an astonishing pace, working in shifts, always moving forward for the entire assault, as did their MP guardians. Now the MPs had a more sedate pace of patrolling the demarcation point between the allies and the Iraqis.

The war was won in 100 hours, but the work was not yet done. The MPs patrolled the highway and the river basin looking for stragglers and infiltrators, insuring that the Iraqi army was not pushing south again. The highway was littered with burned out vehicles and blacken bloated bodies of enemy Soldiers. The MPs stopped and took pictures, souvenirs and the occasional pack of unsoiled “Sumer” brand cigarettes at first, but the novelty soon wore off as each of them realized that the funny poses made by the carbonized bodies as well as those bloating and popping in the sun were people, just like themselves. A young Specialist would

remember a quote from General William T. Sherman during the Civil War and think it apropos – this was “not war, but murder”¹.

The Gulf War culminated in a stunning victory for the Coalition forces hammering the Iraqi forces with impunity from the air as well as in ground combat. This engagement was actually a series of engagements on and around Highways 80 and 8 that connected Iraq and Kuwait. This area became a killing ground as Saddam’s forces were routed and tried to cross the Euphrates in anything that was mobile. The slaughter that ensued was called many things, from a turkey shoot to a war crime. The killing that took place on those two nights in late February of 1991 and a separate incident in early March have sparked questions about the use of such force as well as the effectiveness of the actions in general. Were these actions the needless slaughter of troops that were merely seeking to escape the carnage of the allied juggernaut or was it a justified action to ensure that Saddam could not continue to threaten his neighbors and the world’s oil supply?

The Gulf War, regardless of the machinations that led to the conflict or the aftermath that followed, was executed within a strict framework of objectives laid out by the President of the United States² and based on resolutions³ of the United Nations to liberate Kuwait. These objectives were:

- 1) The withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait

¹ William T. Sherman, "Sherman's March To The Sea," *Son Of The South*, 1864, <http://www.sonofthesouth.net/union-generals/sherman/memoirs/general-sherman-march-sea.htm>. (accessed January 25, 2011).

² Dr. Grant T. Hammon, "Myths of the Gulf War - Some “Lessons” Not to Learn," *Airpower Journal* (Fall 1998): .

³ Jeffery T. Richelson, "Operation Desert Storm: 10 Years After," *National Security Archive*, January 17, 2001, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB39/> (accessed January 25, 2011).

- 2) The restoration of the legitimate government of Kuwait
- 3) The protection of Saudi Arabia and other states in the Gulf from Iraq
- 4) The Protection of U.S. citizens abroad⁴

Many have critiqued the prosecution of the war, especially since the subsequent invasion and liberation of Iraq and the controversy that it garnered. However, within the framework of US Resolution 678 and the stated objectives of President Bush, the mission was accomplished. All of these objectives were met, but at what cost? The actions in the closing hours and days of the conflict are hotly disputed as either unnecessary and heinous or as too lenient, leaving the Iraqi military virtually intact. Some of this stems from the military objectives of the war, as well as later issues that in hindsight could have been solved in 1991. The military objectives were:

- 1) Attack Iraqi political/military leadership and command and control
- 2) Gain and maintain Air Superiority
- 3) Sever Iraqi supply lines
- 4) Destroy Iraqi chemical, biological and nuclear capability
- 5) Destroy Iraqi Republican Guard forces
- 6) Liberate Kuwait⁵

These military objectives were drawn up in support of the political objectives of the war, as outlined above. However, some of the military objectives are clearly forward looking and/or punitive in nature. Most of these objectives were indeed met, with the notable exception of numbers 4 and 5. However, this was not for a lack of effort on the part of coalition forces. Much of the capability for Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) was degraded via air strikes as well

⁴ Hammon.

⁵ Ibid.

as deliberate destruction by ground forces. However capability and delivery systems remained⁶. Additionally, the vaunted Republican Guard was left largely intact when the smoke cleared, allowing Saddam Hussein to maintain a position of power in Iraq specifically and the Gulf region in general.⁷ Therein lies one of the arguments that the killing on the Highway of Death was necessary if ineffective vis-à-vis the objective of eliminating the capability of Saddam to threaten his neighbors.

As the Iraqi forces saw and felt the awesome military might of the allies bearing down upon them, they began to withdraw en masse. The “Regular Army” Iraqis were underequipped and did not have enough in the way of ground transport to escape the closing vice of allied armor. Conversely much of the well-equipped Republican Guard were already out of Kuwait and held positions in Iraq across the Euphrates out of immediate danger of annihilation⁸. The motley column of vehicles fleeing the allies was spotted by US Marine aircraft on the 25th of February and were immediately engaged. The aviators reported the size of the exodus and more aircraft were dedicated to the fray. The objective was to hammer the retreating Iraqis to eliminate a future threat to neighboring countries. This was in line with the military objectives of the war. However, the Republican guard had escaped the might of allied airpower – these were conscripts.

Nonetheless, the slaughter continued unabated for nearly two days and would have gone on except that the weather “went sour”. The Marines and Navy set up kill boxes for the flights of

⁶ Michael Gordon Trainor and Bernard, *The General's War* (New York: Back Bay Book, 1995)440-450.

⁷ Unknown, "Hammurabi Division (Armored)," *GlobalSecurity.org*, June 22, 2006, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/hammurabi.htm>. (accessed January 25, 2011).

⁸ Rick Atkinson, *Crusade - The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 469-488.

aircraft that rotated in around the clock⁹. The sorties were so numerous that soon the aircraft had to be staged in groups of eight every fifteen minutes in order to bring some order to the chaotic killing. And the air traffic controllers still had to divert flights to avoid mid-air collisions¹⁰. The allied laid mines via aerial delivery at either end of the road, effectively pinning the retreating column and then dispatched it in detail. In all over 2000 vehicles and untold lives were destroyed on Highway 80 in two days time¹¹.

The “Highway of Death” was soon a spectacle for the international press to gorge on like so many vultures. Images of the carnage were plastered across front pages and on the evening news¹². It demonstrated the amazing power of the modern American military and the piteous state of the “combat hardened” Iraqi Army. Highway 80 was littered across all lanes with burned-out devastation and corpses¹³. The media was having a field day as the commanding officers basked in the glory of their martial prowess¹⁴. The attention and growing feeling of unease in Washington had repercussions on the battlefield. President Bush and General Powell

⁹ Malcom Lagauche, "Remembering "the Highway Of Death", " *Counter Currents*, February 10, 2010, <http://www.countercurrents.org/lagauche280210.htm>. (accessed January 25, 2011).

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Joyce Chedial, "The Massacre Of Withdrawing Soldiers On The "highway Of Death", " *The Commission Of Inquiry For The International War Crimes Tribunal*, 1992, <http://deoxy.org/wc-death.htm>. (accessed January 25, 2011).

¹² Peter Turnley, "The Unseen Gulf War," *The Unseen Gulf War*, 1999, <http://www.digitaljournalist.org/issue0212/pt01.html>. (accessed January 25, 2011).

¹³ Joe Schlesinger, "The 1991 Gulf War," *CBC Digital Archives*, March 2, 1991, http://archives.cbc.ca/war_conflict/1991_gulf_war/topics/593-3127// (accessed January 25, 2011).

¹⁴ John Barry Thomas and Evan, "Probing A Slaughter," *CBS Business Network*, May, 2000, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_kmnew/is_200005/ai_kepm318464// (accessed January 25, 2011).

decided to end the offensive, fixing the maneuver elements in place and ending the aerial pounding of the Iraqis¹⁵.

The morning of March 2 dawned with the remainder of the Iraqis moving north in compliance with the terms of the US cease-fire. However, Highway 8, another main artery for travel between Iraq and Kuwait, became another scene of slaughter. The coastal road was being used by the retreating Hammurabi Division of the Republican Guard. Meanwhile the 24th Infantry Division (Mechanized) maneuvered to cover the same stretch of road. The two divisions would meet in the desert and fight another battle in spite of the cease fire. The American commander of the 24th, Major General McCaffery would claim that his forces were engaged by the retreating Republican Guard¹⁶. His assertion is backed up by the Official XVIII Airborne Corps Chronology, that gives a nearly minute-by-minute record of the evolving situation from the American point of view¹⁷. However, there are many that maintain that McCaffery should be tried for war crimes as the Iraqis were retreating without being threatening to US forces¹⁸.

Nonetheless, the 24th and allied aircraft would pound the Hammurabi Division for hours, again with impunity. Whether justified or not, the lopsided battle was a clear triumph for the “Victory Division”. By the XVIII Airborne Corps own account, the 24th destroyed hundreds of

¹⁵ Atkinson, 469-488.

¹⁶ Seymore Hersh, "Annals Of War - Overwhelming Force: What Happened In The Final Days Of The Gulf War?," *Cryptome*, May 15, 2000, <http://cryptome.org/mccaffrey-sh.htm>. (accessed January 25, 2011).

¹⁷ Unknown, "XVIII Airborne Corps Desert Storm Chronology," *US Army History*, March, 1991, <http://www.history.army.mil/CHRONOS/mar91.htm>. (accessed January 25, 2011).

¹⁸ Paula Marie Deubel, "Highway Of Death - 1991 Gulf War," *Suite101.com*, September 27, 2009, <http://www.suite101.com/content/highway-of-death-1991-persian-gulf-war-a152455/> (accessed January 25, 2011).

vehicles and captured 66 Iraqis for the loss of only two vehicles and one wounded Soldier¹⁹. This too would be the subject of nearly immediate scrutiny as the press became aware of the story. Unfortunately for the United States, this battle along with the “Turkey Shoot” on Highway 80 a few days before tarnished an otherwise amazing war on the public relations front²⁰.

In the end, much of the Republican Guard had escaped the wrath of the allies by either early retreat or escaping between the pincers during the last days of the conflict. The engagement of Iraqi forces that took place on the two “Highways of Death” did eliminate hundreds of vehicles and between 1500 and 1700 personnel were killed according to some tallies²¹. Some claim that the many of those killed were civilians or were not a direct threat to allied personnel. However, the facts remain concerning the stated political objectives of the war as well as the military objectives set out by military commanders. Thus, the Iraqi army in general and the Republican Guard specifically were targeted by the allied for elimination. The combatant commanders understood those orders and made every effort to carry out those orders until given orders to stand down.

These orders, along with the efficiency of the US Military in the job of destroying targets once engaged are matters of record. The supposition and hyperbole surrounding the actions is of little consequence when the totality of the circumstances are examined. Indeed in both incidents there were many vehicles that were not military issued equipment, but this does not mean that

¹⁹ Unknown, "XVIII Airborne Corps Desert Storm Chronology"

²⁰ Lagauche.

²¹ Carl Conetta, "The Wages Of War - Iraqi Combatant And Noncombatant Fatalities In The 2003 Conflict," *Project On Defense Alternatives*, October 23, 2003, <http://www.comw.org/pda/0310rm8ap2.html>. (accessed January 25, 2011).

they were not being used for military purposes²². The identification of friend and foe on the modern, high speed battlefield is difficult enough without being concerned with which particular unit is in the sight picture or whether a vehicle in a military convoy is a civilian one, or merely confiscated.

The author was witness to the aftermath of the carnage on Highway 8 and observed much of the evidence that may look damning to the reader. However, the author did not observe the remains or evidence of any civilians in or around any of the hundreds of vehicles that were noted on Highway 8, including those that were obviously not military issue. In short, all of the observed evidence indicates that all of the targets were legitimately military.

The engagements of convoys on Highways 80 and 8 were indeed a slaughter of humanity and the worst face of war. It can be legitimately called a Turkey Shoot, as well as being characterized as more murder than war. However, the objectives of the politicians as well as those of the combatant commanders were what led to those slaughters. Regardless of their effectiveness, the combatant commanders were pursuing those goals, one of which was to eliminate Saddam's ability to wage war on his neighbors. Unfortunately, with the benefit of hindsight the observer can see the uselessness of the actions, but then it is always easy to play armchair general. In the end, a necessary evil perpetrated in a time of war led to a slaughter that, in hindsight was ineffective. Perhaps Robert Lee was right to say that "It is well that war is so terrible. We should grow too fond of it."²³

²² Lagauche.

²³ Robert E. Lee, "Robert E. Lee Quotes," *Sons Of The South*, <http://www.sonofthesouth.net/leefoundation/Notable%20Lee%20Quotes.htm>. (accessed January 19, 2011).

WORKS CITED

- Atkinson, Rick. *Crusade - The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.
- Chedial, Joyce. "The Massacre Of Withdrawing Soldiers On The "highway Of Death"." *The Commission Of Inquiry For The International War Crimes Tribunal*, 1992. <http://deoxy.org/wc-death.htm>. (accessed January 25, 2011).
- Conetta, Carl. "The Wages Of War - Iraqi Combatant And Noncombatant Fatalities In The 2003 Conflict." *Project On Defense Alternatives*, October 23, 2003. <http://www.comw.org/pda/0310rm8ap2.html>. (accessed January 25, 2011).
- Deubel, Paula Marie. "Highway Of Death - 1991 Gulf War." *Suite101.com*, September 27, 2009. <http://www.suite101.com/content/highway-of-death-1991-persian-gulf-war-a152455/> (accessed January 25, 2011).
- Hammon, Dr. Grant T. "Myths of the Gulf War - Some "Lessons" Not to Learn." *Airpower Journal* (Fall 1998): .
- Hersh, Seymore. "Annals Of War - Overwhelming Force: What Happened In The Final Days Of The Gulf War?" *Cryptome*, May 15, 2000. <http://cryptome.org/mccaffrey-sh.htm>. (accessed January 25, 2011).
- Lagauche, Malcom. "Remembering "the Highway Of Death"." *Counter Currents*, February 10, 2010. <http://www.countercurrents.org/lagauche280210.htm>. (accessed January 25, 2011).
- Lee, Robert E. "Robert E. Lee Quotes." *Sons Of The South*. <http://www.sonofthesouth.net/leefoundation/Notable%20Lee%20Quotes.htm>. (accessed January 19, 2011).
- Richelson, Jeffery T. "Operation Desert Storm: 10 Years After." *National Security Archive*, January 17, 2001. <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB39//> (accessed January 25, 2011).
- Schlesinger, Joe. "The 1991 Gulf War." *CBC Digital Archives*, March 2, 1991. http://archives.cbc.ca/war_conflict/1991_gulf_war/topics/593-3127// (accessed January 25, 2011).

- Sherman, William T. "Sherman's March To The Sea." *Son Of The South*, 1864.
<http://www.sonofthesouth.net/union-generals/sherman/memoirs/general-sherman-march-sea.htm>. (accessed January 25, 2011).
- Thomas, John Barry and Evan. "Probing A Slaughter." *CBS Business Network*, May, 2000. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_kmnew/is_200005/ai_kepm318464/ (accessed January 25, 2011).
- Trainor, Michael Gordon and Bernard. *The General's War*. New York: Back Bay Book, 1995.
- Turnley, Peter. "The Unseen Gulf War." *The Unseen Gulf War*, 1999.
<http://www.digitaljournalist.org/issue0212/pt01.html>. (accessed January 25, 2011).
- Unknown. "Hammurabi Division (armored)." *Globalsecurity.org*, June 22, 2006.
<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/hammurabi.htm>. (accessed January 25, 2011).
- . "XVIII Airborne Corps Desert Storm Chronology." *US Army History*, March, 1991. <http://www.history.army.mil/CHRONOS/mar91.htm>. (accessed January 25, 2011).