

AMERICA AT WAR

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Big war obstacle: 'Dead enders' defending Iraqi territory to the last

Washington — Tens of thousands of paramilitary and guerrilla fighters loyal to Saddam Hussein pose one of the biggest obstacles to American efforts to quickly topple Iraq's government. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has called them "dead enders," Iraqis who would fight to the end. U.S. officials, worried they may have underestimated these fighters, have begun calling them terrorists and war criminals and focusing significant military efforts on wiping them out. "This band of war criminals has been put on notice," President Bush said Wednesday of fighters he said were using civilians as human shields. "The day of Iraq's liberation will also be a day of justice."

Two confirmed dead is more bad news for 507th Maintenance Company

El Paso, Texas — More bad news struck the Army's 507th Maintenance Company, the support unit of mechanics and others who weren't expected to see combat, as two of its soldiers were listed Wednesday as killed in action. Five members of the Fort Bliss-based unit are prisoners of war, shown in Iraqi television video. Eight others are missing, the Department of Defense confirmed Wednesday. Ruben Estrella said Fort Bliss officials told him Sunday that his son, Pvt. Ruben Estrella-Soto, 18, of El Paso was among the missing. "It's bad," Estrella said in Spanish. "We don't know anything, not knowing anything. It's been three days of waiting."

Turkey pledges tight coordination with U.S. before putting troops in Iraq

Diyarbakir, Turkey — Turkey's military chief of staff pledged Wednesday to coordinate with the United States before sending troops into northern Iraq and said there would be no deployment unless a refugee crisis erupted or Turkey's security was threatened. Gen. Hilmi Ozkok's softer tone was similar to that of Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, who said Tuesday that Turkey would send forces 12 miles into northern Iraq to stop any flood of refugees only in case of crisis. The United States has been pressuring Turkey not to send its forces into northern Iraq. Washington is concerned about possible friendly fire incidents with U.S. forces and potential clashes between Turkish troops and Iraqi Kurds.

Sandstorm over Persian Gulf interrupts bombing runs over Iraq

Aboard the USS Kitty Hawk — A towering sandstorm over the Persian Gulf interrupted bombing missions Wednesday from at least one U.S. aircraft carrier and grounded coalition helicopters in southern Iraq. Navy officials said only two F/A-18 Hornet fighters aboard the USS Kitty Hawk were able to launch before a swirling cloud of dust blowing in from the northwest enveloped the ship just after midday. Visibility was reduced to less than 100 yards. Flight operations resumed later Wednesday after a delay of about 4 1/2 hours. Most of the missed flights were canceled outright, and commanders would continue to make launch decisions on a case by case basis, said Lt. Brook DeWalt, a Kitty Hawk spokesman.

British forces backed by airstrikes pound Iraqi armored vehicles

Camp As Sayliyah, Qatar — Coalition aircraft pounded a convoy of Iraqi tanks and armored vehicles streaming out of the besieged southern city of Basra late Wednesday, British military sources said. The sources estimated the column at about 120 vehicles, heading southeast along the main road toward Abadan. They said it appeared the Iraqis were using the sandstorm that had blanketed the region to try to sneak out. British forces have ringed Basra for several days, exchanging artillery fire with forces loyal to Saddam Hussein's regime. The British say they are coming to the defense of inhabitants who rose up in the streets against Saddam Hussein's regime on Tuesday.

Senate OKs \$2.2B budget halving Bush's tax cuts to \$350 billion

Washington — The Senate delivered a wartime rebuff to President Bush's domestic plans on Wednesday approving a \$2.2 trillion budget that provides less than half the \$726 billion in tax cuts he wants to rally the listless economy. The Republican-controlled chamber used a mostly party-line 56-44 roll call to approve the fiscal blueprint, which endorses just \$350 billion of the president's planned tax cuts through 2013. That vote came after moderate GOP senators joined Democrats to fend off, by 52-48, a last-ditch Republican attempt to add \$67 billion back to the tax reduction package. The final say on the budget's tax-cutting figure will come when House-Senate bargainers craft a compromise tax-and-spending framework. The Republican-led House approved its own budget last week embracing Bush's entire \$726 billion tax-cutting economic plan, and GOP leaders are sure to drive the tax figure in their compromise as high as they can.

1,000 Airborne Troops Take Airfield In Northern Iraq

By MATT KELLEY
Associated Press Writer

Washington — About 1,000 U.S. Army troops parachuted into Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq Wednesday, marking the first large coalition ground force which could open another front against Saddam Hussein's regime.

The soldiers from the Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade seized an airfield at about 4 p.m. EST, a senior Pentagon official said. He said the troops did not encounter any hostile fire.

The troops landed at an airfield called Bashur, about 30 miles south of the Turkish border in territory controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Party, according to Philadelphia Inquirer reporter Ken Dilan-

ian, who is accompanying the unit.

Pentagon officials have said for weeks they would have U.S. forces in northern Iraq to open another front against Saddam Hussein's forces. The vast majority of the coalition ground troops in Iraq are moving toward Baghdad from the south after entering from Kuwait.

"I can only tell you yes, they've gone in. They're on the ground," said Lt. Col. Thomas Collins, a spokesman for the U.S. Army's Southern European Task Force. The 173rd, based in Vicenza, Italy, is part of the task force.

Future airlifts into the area will include supplies and support personnel for the 173rd's fighters, defense officials said. The airfield's 6,700-foot runway is long enough to land C-17 Globemasters and other U.S. mili-

tary cargo planes.

Several hundred U.S. special forces already were in northern Iraq, one official said, declining to elaborate on the mission. Coalition airstrikes in portions of northern Iraq controlled by Saddam's regime have hit Iraqi military forces in the field and other strategic targets, the official said.

Pentagon officials had hoped to have the Army's 4th Infantry Division invade Iraq from the north, but Turkey balked at allowing up to 62,000 U.S. troops on its soil to prepare for that option. The use of the 173rd shows the military has shifted to a smaller, lighter force.

Military officials say they would have liked to have secured key oil fields around the northern cities of Mosul and Kirkuk — and perhaps the cities themselves — by

now, but they are confident of the revised plan's success.

Besides the strategic cities of Mosul and Kirkuk, another key target in northern Iraq is Tikrit, Saddam's hometown and the tribal center for most of his inner circle. Most of the Anbar Division of Iraq's Republican Guard relocated from the Mosul area to the Tikrit area shortly before the war began.

Another key mission for the 173rd could be to keep order in northern Iraq, which is controlled by two semi-autonomous Kurdish factions but also includes several splinter groups and a base for the al-Qaida linked Ansar al-Islam. Turkey has said it may send more troops into northern Iraq to prevent refugees from moving north, while U.S. officials have said they advised Turkey against sending large additional forces into northern Iraq.



■ Commander Jonathan Kan of the USS Providence, left, oversees the re-enlistment ceremony of MM1 Curtis Hornel while Lt. j.g. Jeff Yacker, right, holds the bible during an awards ceremony in the crew's mess area while operating in the Red Sea Tuesday.

TIM COOK
The Day

For crew of Providence, medals arrived nearly as fast as missiles

By ROBERT A. HAMILTON
Day Staff Writer

Aboard the USS Providence — Just over three years ago, Seth A. Lorenz was waiting tables at a restaurant in Florida. On Tuesday he was on the mess decks of a submarine cruising the Red Sea, receiving a Navy-Marine Corps Achievement Medal, or NAM, for operating the radio room and coordinating missile strikes against Iraq.

Since he joined the Navy in September 1999, Lorenz has advanced to Electronic Technician 2nd Class, working on some of the most complicated communications gear on Earth.

Lorenz, ET2 Marcus Allen Koegler and Lt. j.g. Josh Powers were all awarded the NAM for their role in keeping the ship in touch with the launch coordinator.

"I think we were the only ship that stayed 'up chat' the whole time," said Cmdr. Jonathan H. Kan, the captain of Providence. While other ships were under pressure to improve their communications capabilities, "that never happened on Providence."

Lorenz shrugged off the praise. "Everybody in the radio room performed as good as could be expected," he said. "There were no problems with the equipment, and people knew what they were doing and did their jobs."

Most sailors will wait weeks, and some-

'Everybody in the radio room performed as good as could be expected. There were no problems with the equipment, and people knew what they were doing and did their jobs.'

Electronic Technician 2nd Class Seth A. Lorenz

times months, for their medals to catch up with them. Kan put on a push to get the citations finished so his sailors could get their NAMs within a week of the time they earned them.

"I've never seen medals come through this fast," said Torpedoman 2nd Class Paul C. Paolino. "It was a complete surprise."

The NAMs were presented during a formal ceremony in the crew's dining area, where an 8-foot American flag served as a backdrop.

The NAMs — green ribbons with orange stripes attached to a brass medallion decorated with a fouled anchor and four stars — recognize superior performance in a difficult situation.

Five of the medals went to reload team leaders: Chief Fire Control Technician Peter F. Keller, Storekeeper 1st Class Daniel D. King Sr., Torpedoman 1st Class Stephen E. Butterfield, Paolino and Machinist Mate 2nd Class Matthew K. Rector.

The commanding officer noted that, so far, the Providence reload crew has compiled a remarkable record.

"We met all taskings, and we met them on time, when a lot of ships could not," Kan said. Last February, when the boat's dual reload teams began to practice, they cut more than one-third of the time off the fleet's standard.

On the first night of combat, the team reloaded missiles into the torpedo tubes and spun up the guidance systems in about one-quarter of the time expected just for reloading, he said.

"This is a small token of our thanks to you," Kan said as he presented the men with their awards.

Paolino said the success in combat was a result of running through the process so many times in training.

"It's to the point where I don't have to yell out every order because everyone knows what they have to do," he said. "It got very familiar and very quick."

Medals for quickly planning the missions went to Chief Fire Control Technician Phillip M. Johnson, Fire Control Technician 2nd Class Kevin Bojanowski, FT2 Ian D. Seyerle, FT1 Jon A. Niedzielski and FT1 Jeff A.

Moore. Moore is actually assigned to the USS Norfolk in Virginia.

Machinist Mate 2nd Class Charles N. Mason earned a NAM for his work before the deployment in overhauling the carbon dioxide scrubbers, replacing key components in the trim and drain system and performing other critical maintenance tasks.

MM2 Class Craig R. Forehand was cited for his role in maintenance and repairs, including after hours, weekends and on Christmas Day.

"I can't thank you enough for the sacrifices you made," Kan said.

"We knew we could be leaving pretty much at any time, so we were trying to get everything ready and keep it ready," Mason said. He made the boat's last deployment in 2001, and concentrated on systems that gave the crew problems two years ago.

"So far, a lot of the stuff we had problems with last time has been working very well," Mason said. "The EOG (electrolytic oxygen generator) is working great, and the scrubbers are good to go."

Mason will miss his third wedding anniversary in May, but he hopes to be back for the birth of his first child in October.

One crewman was recognized for his willingness to do it all over again. MM1 Curtis R. Hornel re-enlisted this week, and was administered the oath at Tuesday's ceremony. h.hamilton@theday.com

Elite Iraqi troops take advantage of the bad weather to reposition

Central Iraq (AP) — Vicious sandstorms began to abate early Thursday as U.S. forces headed north toward Baghdad, warned of a possible confrontation with a convoy of Iraqi Republican Guard troops.

Vast columns of U.S. military vehicles — one 10 miles long — rolled along a six-lane highway under skies clearing of the thick dust and sand that for days had made flying and often driving nearly impossible. A weather shift means a change in fortunes for allied forces likely able to resume bombing missions.

On Wednesday, a military intelligence officer with the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force warned that units of the Republican Guard — Saddam Hussein's best-trained, best-equipped and most tenacious fighters — were moving south. He said the units were in a 1,000-vehicle convoy on Highway 7, the same highway that U.S. forces were traveling on to-

ward the Iraqi capital.

The Iraqis, analysts said, likely were taking advantage of the sandstorms to reposition their tanks in response to U.S. forces approaching the outskirts of the capital.

In northern Iraq, just before midnight Wednesday, about 1,000 U.S. Army troops from the 173rd Airborne parachuted into an airbase in the Kurdish autonomous zone, the first large ground force in the region from which war planners want to open another front against Saddam's regime.

And in the south, earlier Wednesday, coalition aircraft pounded a convoy of Iraqi tanks and armored vehicles streaming out of the besieged southern city of Basra. British military sources said. The city has been ringed by British troops trying to secure the city and deliver humanitarian aid to trapped residents.

Elsewhere on the battlefield, there were reports of skirmishes into early Thursday in Karbala,

in the center of the country, where U.S. forces destroyed two tanks and four armored personnel carriers, killing an unknown number of Iraqi soldiers.

There had been major fighting Tuesday night near Najaf, just south of Karbala; U.S. troops there fought regular Iraqi forces and destroyed a number of tanks and armored personnel carriers, though it was uncertain how many.

Marines were fighting house to house in Nasiriyah, further south. A reporter for WTVD in Durham, N.C., attached to the Camp Lejeune Marines, said at least 25 Marines had been injured. He said Marines were using flares to light areas so they could see their enemy.

One military analyst, asked about the southern advance of Iraqi troops believed to be Republican Guard, called it a bold move — one that could not have been attempted if American tank-killing A-10 Warthogs and Apache attack

Bush rallies U.S. troops in Florida, heads for a key meeting with Blair

MacDill Air Force Base, Fla. (AP) — President Bush said Wednesday the war in Iraq is far from over and the toughest battles lie ahead as coalition forces near Baghdad. After rallying troops, Bush flew to Camp David for a war council with British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

"I can assure you there will be a day of reckoning for Iraq, and that day is drawing near," Bush told hundreds of cheering American troops and their family members in a packed hangar in Florida.

"Our military is making good progress in Iraq, yet this war is far from over," he said, making a last-minute change of wording that dropped a reference to the U.S. military being "ahead of schedule."

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer, briefing reporters on the way here aboard Air Force One, said Bush would tell his audience "Our progress is ahead of schedule, yet this war is far from over."

Bush decided to delete the "ahead of schedule" phrase during a final review of the speech on the plane, aides said later.

U.S.-led troops encountered stiffening Iraqi resistance as the ground war entered a sixth day. And American and British casualties raised questions about battle plans.

Bush proclaimed anew that allied forces would prevail and overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein.

"As they approach Baghdad, our fighting units are facing the most desperate elements of a doomed regime. We cannot know the duration of this war, but we are prepared for the battle ahead," Bush said in his hangar speech.

"We will stay on the path, mile by mile, all the way to Baghdad and all the way to victory," he said to thunderous applause.

Bush received classified briefings on the war during his visit to the headquarters of the U.S. Central Command on this Air Force base in Tampa, Fla. The unit's top general, Tommy Franks, is running the war from a command center in Qatar.

The president spoke a day after the first bodies of American servicemen were brought back to the United States.