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World

U.S.

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Travel

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War plan drew U.S. commandos from shadows

By James Dao
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KUWAIT -- For America's Special Operations forces, the war in Iraq almost started with a disaster.

On March 18, three MH-53 Pave Low helicopters swept low and fast through the night toward a landing zone in the southern Iraqi desert. In their bellies were Toyota pickup trucks carrying Army Special Forces soldiers: the unconventional vanguard of an invasion that was to begin in two days.

But in the swirling dust, one of the helicopters clipped a rock outcropping as it tried to land. The aircraft whirled about like a bucking bronco before crashing on its side in a screech of twisting metal, flipping a truck on top of a soldier inside.

At an air base in Kuwait, commanders watched in horror as the scene unfolded in real-time video broadcast from a Predator drone circling the crash scene.

"I heard, 'Chopper down!' " recalled a Special Operations soldier who was aboard one of the other helicopters. "I thought: we're done. We'll have to go home. I thought we had lost a third of our team."

But the air crew and commandos walked away from the crash without serious injuries. The soldiers crowded into their remaining trucks and raced into the dark toward their final destination, the city of Nasiriya.

So began the secret war in Iraq. Despite the shaky start, the next three days unfolded smoothly. Dozens more 12-member Special Forces teams infiltrated southern and western Iraq to hunt for Scud missiles and pinpoint bombing targets. Scores of Navy Seals seized oil terminals and pumping stations on the southern coast. Air Force combat controllers flew combat missions in AC-130 gunships and established austere desert airstrips to begin the flow of soldiers and supplies deep into Iraq.

These carefully choreographed opening days marked an important milestone for Special Operations forces, military commanders say.

Once viewed as mavericks and cowboys needing to be segregated from conventional troops, Special Operations forces were tightly incorporated into the United States Central Command's planning from day one.

As a result, more Special Operations commandos and air crews were assigned to more missions and integrated more thoroughly into conventional military operations than in any other war in modern American history, senior officers said. All told, more than 9,000

Special Operations forces were involved in the conflict, military officials said.

"This was the largest and most comprehensive integration of Special Operations and conventional forces that I've ever seen," said Col. Randy O'Boyle, commander of the Joint Special Operations Aviation Detachment for southern Iraq.

It was a far cry from the Persian Gulf war of 1991, where Special Operations forces were kept largely on the sidelines. But it would not be a replay of Afghanistan, where Army Green Berets and Navy Seals led the fighting. In Iraq, it would mainly be the warplanes, tanks and infantrymen of the conventional military that brought down Saddam Hussein's government.

Not everyone was pleased with that development. After their star turn in Afghanistan, many commandos were disappointed to play a supporting role in Iraq. They complained about restrictive rules, of being kept on short leashes by cautious commanders. They felt like "lions led by dogs," as one commando put it.

But to Special Operations commanders, who wanted to prove that their small units could play a significant role in a large-scale conventional campaign, the war was an experiment that largely succeeded.

To them, Special Operations are the major growth industry of the American military, and their goal is to win a larger slice of the Pentagon budget. If that requires coming out of the shadows to fight alongside conventional forces, Iraq proved they were ready to do so, the commanders said.

"There is more willingness to introduce Special Operations forces to the battlefield," said Commodore Robert S. Harward, the commander of the Naval Special Warfare Task Group in Iraq. "We don't operate purely in the black world anymore."

Small Teams, Big Fights

The Special Operations trademark is to work in small, agile, stealthy teams of a dozen men or fewer. That enables them to move quickly into and out of trouble. It also means that they are almost always outnumbered when they get into fights.

In the first days of April, for instance, an Army Special Forces unit, known as an A-team, stumbled onto a battalion of several hundred Republican Guard soldiers north of Karbala.

Tanks from the Army's Third Infantry Division had already raced through the town en route to Baghdad, and the Green Berets thought they were traveling a secure route behind them. But as the commandos turned onto Highway 9 in the town of Musayyib, scores of Iraqi soldiers emerged from doorways, firing AK-47 rifles and rocket-propelled grenades.

"There were green uniforms everywhere," said an Air Force combat controller in charge of calling for air support for the A-team.

The soldiers floored their Humvees and raced to the outskirts of town, where they pulled into an irrigation ditch to assess their situation. There were hundreds of soldiers behind them, but there might be many more ahead, perhaps with tanks. They decided to go back and find a safer route.

Every Green Beret was firing his weapon as they sped back into town — even the drivers, who had to steer with one hand around wrecked Iraqi trucks while shooting with the other.

The combat controller called for air support, and two A-10 Warthogs, heavily armored jets designed to attack tanks from low altitudes, were now circling overhead. But the jets could not drop their bombs because the area was too densely populated.

Bullets pinged all around the Humvees as Iraqi soldiers on balconies shot toward the advancing convoy. At one point, a team member looked up to see a grenade explode under the truck in front of him, tipping it momentarily onto two wheels.

Yet somehow, the convoy reached the edge of town without a single casualty. The soldiers turned to see three pickup trucks filled with Iraqi paramilitaries chasing them. But the A-10's destroyed the trucks with their 30-millimeter guns.

It was the fiercest firefight most of the men had experienced. But the combat controller was amazed at how cool the soldiers — most of them in their late 20's and early 30's — seemed throughout the 90-minute ordeal.

"No one freaked out," he said. "It was like no one was worried they wouldn't make it."

Blue on Blue

It is known as blue on blue: friendly forces attacking each other. And it is an all-too-common problem for small Special Operations units. Working on their own, often deep behind enemy lines, they can easily become trapped in crossfire or be mistaken for the enemy by American patrols.

To prove they could fight alongside conventional forces, the Special Operations units had to demonstrate that they could avoid blue-on-blue casualties in Iraq.

They succeeded, but not without some special precautions, including using electronic tracking devices that allowed commanders to monitor the movement of small units and direct them away from allied fire.

Still, in at least one case, it took a soldier's heroism to prevent a deadly mistake.

After the fall of Nasiriya in early April, a Special Forces A-team decided to escort friendly tribal leaders and some of their fighters into the city, hoping to draw cheering crowds that would welcome the sheiks as liberators.

But a company of American marines had not been notified of the parade. When the Special Forces convoy rode toward a checkpoint, Iraqi militiamen in white pickup trucks led the way. The marines, thinking they were under attack by fedayeen militiamen, opened fire with machine guns and M-16 rifles.

Three Iraqis were wounded. A round whizzed by the head of an American civil affairs officer as he bent to grab his bullet-proof vest, grazing his skull.

"We all thought we were going to buy it," a team member said. "Everyone was just trying to stay low."

Then, from the middle of the convoy, a Special Forces communications officer took matters into his own hands.

Leaping from his Humvee, the soldier calmly raised his sniper rifle over his head and strode to the front of the stalled convoy, into the line of fire, according to a Special Forces commander and a member of the team.

He turned toward the marine guard post, and then toward marine snipers across the river to display his uniform. The shooting subsided.

"He basically stopped it by walking into the middle of the kill zone," said the lieutenant colonel who commanded a battalion of Army Special Forces soldiers in southern Iraq.

Out of the Shadows

They call themselves the quiet professionals, preferring to keep their missions wrapped in an aura of mystery. "Even my wife doesn't know what I do," said a team sergeant.

Indeed, many Special Operations missions were conducted under intense secrecy in coordination with the Central Intelligence Agency, including recruiting Iraqi opposition leaders to help locate Baath Party officials and military targets, both before and during the war.

In Najaf, for instance, an informant code-named Bulldog pinpointed numerous Baath Party and fedayeen targets for American bombs. In Nasiriya, an Iraqi provided Green Berets information that helped find Pfc. Jessica Lynch. And in northern Iraq, Army Special Forces working with Kurdish militias helped oust Iraqi troops from Kirkuk and Mosul.

But there is another, less glamorous side to the secret work what Special Operations forces do.

That mission was typified by a Special Forces A-team that spent eight days watching a road near the Karbala gap. Living in ditches and holes, they subsisted on food and water meant to last only five days. They were not discovered, did not fire a shot and provided valuable intelligence to the Third Infantry Division, which was racing north toward Baghdad.

The mission was a success, yet so dull.

One Navy Seal, describing sitting in a "hide hole" for nearly three days, said he was unable to move, or even sleep, almost the entire time. By the end, he had memorized the location of every rock and plant in sight.

This is not what these self-described "action guys" signed up for. They came for the adrenaline rush of war, the chance to savor the acrid taste of fear. But they accept the tedium with the same even demeanor with which they typically approach battle. It is all part of the job.

"Sometimes," said a Special Forces medic, "fighting is the easy part."

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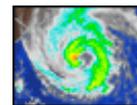


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