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INTRODUCTION

By Tom Engelhardt



t the beginning of 2007, in a typical air strike of the Iraq War, two missiles were fired at targets somewhere in the city of Ramadi, capital of al-Anbar province in the heartland of the Sunni insurgency, in the course of a battle with American forces stationed there. According to newspaper accounts, “18 insurgents” were killed.

Air power has, since World War II, been the American way of war. The invasion of Iraq began, after all, with a dominating show of air power that was meant to “shock and awe” – that is, cow – not just Saddam Hussein’s regime, but the whole “axis of evil” and other countries the Bush administration had in its mental gun sights. Among the largest of America’s “permanent” megabases in Iraq is Balad Air Base with the sorts of daily air-traffic pile-ups that you would normally see over Chicago’s O’Hare Airport. And yet, as Tomdispatch.com has written numerous times over these last years, reporters in Iraq almost determinedly refuse to look up or report on the regular, if intermittent, application of American air power especially to heavily populated neighborhoods in Iraq’s cities.

Now, the Bush “surge” is officially beginning. Little about it is strikingly new or untried – except possibly the unspoken urge to ratchet up the use of air power in Iraq, the only thing a Pentagon with desperately overstretched ground forces really has to throw into the escalation breach (as in recent months it has drastically escalated the use of air power in Afghanistan). Pepe Escobar, the superb globe-trotting correspondent for Asia Times, has recently warned that the new Bush administration “plan” signals “the dire prospect... of a devastating air war over Baghdad” in which “Iraqification-cum-surge” will prove “a disaster mostly for every Baghdadi caught in the crossfire.”

Julian E. Barnes of the Los Angeles Times recently reported that the U.S. Air Force has the Iraqi itch and is getting ready to scratch it. Air Force commanders are preparing for a “heightened role in the volatile region.” They are, he reported, already “gear-

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ing up for just such a role in Iraq as part of Bush's planned troop increase" – an expansion of air power that "could include aggressive new tactics designed to deter Iranian assistance to Iraqi militants... [and] more forceful patrols by Air Force and Navy fighter planes along the Iran-Iraq border to counter the smuggling of bomb supplies from Iran."

Until now, U.S. air power in Iraq has been a non-story – if you weren't an Iraqi. In the coming months, however, it may force its way onto the front pages of our papers and onto the nightly TV news – but not if the Pentagon has anything to say about it. Doing some journalistic sleuthing, Nick Turse has discovered just how secretive the Pentagon has been about offering any significant information on the size, scope, and damage involved in its air operations over Iraq. The story of this secret American air war is now told for the first time.

Bombs over Baghdad

The Pentagon's Secret Air War in Iraq

By Nick Turse

A secret air war is being waged in Iraq — often in and around that country's population centers — about which we can find out little. The U.S. military keeps information on the munitions expended in its air efforts under tight wraps, refusing to offer details on the scale of use and so minimizing the importance of air power in Iraq. But expert opinion holds that the forms of aerial assault being employed in that country, though hardly covered in our media, may account for most of the U.S. and coalition-attributed Iraqi civilian deaths since the 2003 invasion.

While some aspects of the air war remain a total mystery, Air Force officials do acknowledge that U.S. military and coalition aircraft dropped at least 111,000 pounds of bombs on targets in Iraq in 2006. This figure, 177 bombs in all, does not include guided missiles and unguided rockets fired, or cannon rounds expended; nor, according to a U.S. Central Command Air Forces (CENTAF) spokesman, does it take into account the munitions used by some Marine Corps and other coalition aircraft or any of the Army's helicopter gunships. Moreover, it does not include munitions used by the armed helicopters of the many private security contractors flying their own missions in Iraq.

Air War, Iraq: 2006

In statistics provided to Tomdispatch, CENTAF reported a total of 10,519 “close air support missions” in Iraq in 2006, during which its aircraft dropped 177 bombs and fired 52 “Hellfire/Maverick missiles.” These air strikes presumably included numerous highly publicized missions ranging from the January air strike outside the town of Baiji that reportedly “killed a family of 12,” including at least three women and three young children, to the December attack on an insurgent safehouse in the Garma area, near Fallujah, that reportedly killed “two women and a child” in addition to five guerillas. Then there were the even less well remembered events, such as those on July 28th when, according to official reports, an Air Force Predator unmanned aerial vehicle destroyed an

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“anti-Iraqi forces” vehicle with Hellfire missiles, while Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcons “expended a GBU-12, destroying an anti-Iraqi forces location,” both in the vicinity of the city of Ramadi.

The latter weapon, Guided Bomb Unit-12, a laser-guided bomb with a 500-pound general purpose warhead, was the most frequently used bomb in Iraq in 2006, according to CENTAF statistics provided to Tomdispatch. In addition to the ninety-five GBU-12s “expended,” sixty-seven satellite-guided, 500-pound GBU-38s and fifteen 2,000-pound GBU-31/32 munitions were also dropped on Iraqi targets last year, according to official Air Force figures.

One weapon conspicuously left out of this total is rockets – such as the 2.75-inch Hydra-70 rocket which can be outfitted with various warheads and is fired from fixed-wing aircraft and most helicopters. The number of rockets fired is withheld from the press so as, according to a CENTAF spokesman, not to “skew the tally and present an inaccurate picture of the air campaign.” The number of rockets fired may be quite significant as, according to a 2005 press release issued by Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT), who helped secure a \$900 million Hydra contract from the Army for General Dynamics, “the widely used Hydra-70 rocket... has seen extensive use in Afghanistan and Iraq... [and] has become the world’s most widely used helicopter-launched weapon system.” Early last year, Sandra I. Erwin of National Defense Magazine noted that the U.S. military was looking to the Hydra to serve as a low-cost weapon for Iraq’s urban areas. “The Army already buys and stockpiles thousands of the 2.75-inch Hydra rockets, and is seeking to equip as many as 73,000 with the laser kits, under a program called ‘advanced precision kill weapon system,’ or APKWS. The Navy would purchase 8,000 for Marine Corps helicopters,” she wrote.

The number of cannon rounds fired – some models of the AC-130 gunship, for instance, have a Gatling gun that can fire up to 1,800 rounds in a single minute – is also a closely guarded secret. The official reason given is that “special forces often use aircraft such as the AC-130” and since “their missions and operations are classified, so therefore these figures are not released.”

Repeated inquiries concerning another reporter’s statistics on cannon rounds fired by CENTAF aircraft prompted the same official to emphatically state in an email: “WE DO NOT REPORT CANNON ROUNDS.” His superior officer, Lt. Col. John Kennedy, the Deputy Director of CENTAF Public Affairs, followed up, noting: “Glad to see you appreciate the tremendous efforts [my subordinate] has already expended on you. Trust me,

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it's probably much more significant than the relentless pursuit of the number of cannon rounds."

But the number of cannon rounds and rockets fired by U.S. aircraft is not an insignificant matter, according to Les Roberts, formerly an epidemiologist for the World Health Organization in Rwanda during that country's civil war and an expert on the human costs of the war in Iraq. According to Roberts, who was last in Iraq in 2004 (where, he says, he personally witnessed "the shredding of entire blocks" in Baghdad's Sadr City by aerial cannon fire), "rocket and cannon fire could account for most coalition-attributed civilian deaths." He adds, "I find it disturbing that they will not release this [figure], but even more disturbing that they have not released such information to Congressmen who have requested it."

Non-CENTAF military officials were equally tight-lipped about such munitions – at least with me. A Public Affairs officer from U.S. Central Command told me that the Command didn't track such information. When I questioned a coalition spokesman in Baghdad about the number of rockets and cannon rounds fired by Army and Marine Corps helicopters in Iraq in 2006, I was told, "We cannot comment on your inquiry due to operational security."

I then pointed out that just last month, in National Defense Magazine, Col. Robert A. Fitzgerald, the Marine Corps' head of aviation plans and policy, was quoted as saying that, in 2006, "Marine rotary-wing aircraft flew more than 60,000 combat flight hours, and fixed-wing platforms completed 31,000. They dropped 80 tons of bombs and fired 80 missiles, 3,532 rockets and more than 2 million rounds of smaller ammunition."

When asked if this admission had endangered operational security, the spokesman responded, "I cannot comment on the policies or release authority of a Marine colonel."

While the Marine Corps' statistics presumably include totals of munitions used in Afghanistan, where American air power has played a large role in the fighting, they do remind us that the minimal figures given out by CENTAF don't give an accurate picture of the air war in Iraq. These particular totals are, according CENTAF, "separate from the data provided" to Tomdispatch on Iraqi bomb and missile expenditure in 2006.

"Relentless Pursuit"

Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the American air war in Iraq, often targeting urban areas, has been given remarkably short shrift in the media. In 2004, Tom

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Engelhardt, writing at Tomdispatch, called attention to this glaring absence. Seymour Hersh's seminal piece of reportage, "Up in the Air," published in the New Yorker in late 2005, ushered in some mainstream attention to the subject. Articles by Dahr Jamail, an independent journalist who covered the American occupation and war in Iraq, before and after the Hersh piece, are among the smattering of pieces that have offered glimpses of the air campaign and its impact. To date, however, the mainstream media has not, to use the words of Lt. Col. Kennedy, engaged in a "relentless pursuit of the number of cannon rounds" fired or any other aspect of the air war or its consequences for the people of Iraq.

While we will undoubtedly never know the full extent of the human costs of the U.S. air campaign, just a few dogged reporters assigned to the air-power beat might, at the very least, have offered some sense of this one-sided air war. Since this has not been the case, we must rely on the best available evidence. One valuable source is a national cross-sectional cluster sample survey of mortality in Iraq since the 2003 invasion. Carried out by epidemiologists at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health and Iraqi physicians organized through Mustansiriya University in Baghdad, it estimated 655,000 "excess Iraqi deaths as a consequence of the war." The study, published in the British medical journal, *The Lancet*, in October 2006, found that from March 2003 to June 2006, 13% of violent deaths in Iraq were caused by coalition air strikes. If the 655,000 figure, including over 601,000 violent deaths, is anywhere close to accurate – and the study offered a possible range of civilian deaths that ran from 392,979 to 942,636 – this would equal approximately 78,133 Iraqis killed by bombs, missiles, rockets, or cannon rounds from coalition aircraft between March 2003 when the invasion of Iraq began and last June when the study concluded.

There are indications that the U.S. air war has taken an especially grievous toll on Iraqi children. According to statistics provided to Tomdispatch by *The Lancet* study's authors, 50% of all violent deaths of Iraqi children under 15 years of age, between March 2003 and June 2006, were due to coalition air strikes.

The *Lancet* study used well-established survey methods, which have been proven in conflict zones from Kosovo to the Congo, and interviewers actually inspected death certificates from 92% of the households surveyed where they were requested (which they did 87% of the time). The Iraq Body Count Project, a group of researchers based in the United Kingdom who maintain a public database of Iraqi civilian deaths resulting from the war, carefully restricts itself to the sparser media reports of civilian fatalities that

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come out of Iraq. While a much lower number (currently the range of media-reported deaths stands at: 55,441-61,133) than the The Lancet's findings, an analysis of their carefully limited data also offers a glimpse of the human costs of the air war.

Statistics provided to Tomdispatch by the Iraq Body Count Project show that since the U.S. invasion in 2003, coalition air strikes have, according to media sources alone – which as we know have covered the air war poorly – caused between 15,593-17,067 Iraqi civilian casualties, including 3,625-4,093 deaths. Last year, media reports listed between 169-200 Iraqis killed and 111-112 injured in twenty-eight separate coalition air strikes, according to the IBC project.

These numbers also appear to be on the rise. In an email message to Tomdispatch last month, John Sloboda, the co-founder and spokesperson for the IBC Project, notes that the “vast majority [of lethal air strikes] have been in the last half of the year.”

When asked about the modest air power casualty figures provided by the Iraq Body Count Project and whether CENTAF accepts them, Lt. Col. Kennedy dodged the question, telling Tomdispatch, “We do not track such numbers and so cannot comment on the Project's efforts or validity.” He had a similar answer when it came to The Lancet study's findings.

Asked about the assertion that the second half of 2006 was much deadlier for Iraqis due to U.S. air strikes and the possible reasons for this, Kennedy waxed eloquent, “War, by its very nature has ebbs and flows, and we constantly review the application of air-power to best support the forces on the ground in theater. We view this as simply part of our contract to the warfighters. As we do not discuss operational aspects of missions, I'll decline further comment.”

Kennedy went on to say that the U.S. makes “every effort” to “minimize collateral damage regardless of whether the enemy is on open ground or within the confines of a city.” Just days ago, in the Los Angeles Times, Lt. Gen. Carrol H. “Howie” Chandler, the Air Force's Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Plans and Requirements, expanded on this line of thought, noting, “I wouldn't automatically write off air power in an urban environment for fear of collateral damage... We have the capability with precision targeting and the new weapons to operate in an urban environment.”

Sarah Sewall, who served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense from 1993 to 1996 and is now Director for the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard, agrees that air power has a role to play in urban operations, and may even mitigate civilian harm in

