

The battle of Baghdad

Ever so slowly, the suburbs were turned into battlefields

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Beside the highway, the Iraqi armoured vehicle was still smouldering, a cloud of blue-grey smoke rising above the plane trees under which its crew had been sheltering. Two trucks were burnt out on the other side of the road. The American Apache helicopters had left just a few minutes before I arrived. A squad of soldiers, flat on their stomachs, were setting up an anti-armour weapon on the weed-strewn pavement, aiming at the empty airport motorway for the first American tanks to come thrashing down the highway.

Then there were the Iraqi bodies, piled high in the back of a pick-up truck in front of me, army boots hanging over the tailboard, a soldier with an automatic rifle sitting beside them. Beside the highway, a squad of troops was stacking rocket-propelled grenades beside a row of empty shops as the ground beneath us vibrated with the impact of American air strikes and shellfire. The area was called Qadisiya. It was Iraq's last front line.

Thus did the Battle for Baghdad enter its first hours yesterday, a conflict that promises to be both dirty and cruel. Even the city's police force was sent to the front, its officers parading in a fleet of squad cars through the central streets, waving their newly issued Kalashnikov rifles from the windows.

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What is one to say of such frantic, impersonal – and, yes, courageous – chaos? A truck crammed with more than a hundred Iraqi troops, many in blue uniforms, all of them carrying rifles which gleamed in the morning sunlight, sped past me towards the airport. A few made victory signs in the direction of my car – I confess to touching 145km an hour on the speedometer – but of course one had to ask what their hearts were telling them. “Up the line to death” was the phrase that came to mind. Two miles away, at the Yarmouk hospital, the surgeons stood in the car park in blood-stained overalls; they had already handled their first intake of military casualties.

A few hours later, an Iraqi minister was to tell the world that the Republican Guard had just retaken the airport from the Americans, that they were under fire but had won “a great victory”. Around Qadisiya, however, it didn’t look that way. Tank crews were gunning their T-72s down the highway past the main Baghdad railway yards in a convoy of armoured personnel carriers and Jeeps and clouds of thick blue exhaust fumes. The more modern T-82s, the last of the Soviet-made fleet of battle tanks, sat hull down around Jordan Square with a clutch of BMP armoured vehicles.

The Americans were coming. The Americans were claiming to be in the inner suburbs of Baghdad – which was untrue; indeed, the story was designed, I’m sure, to provoke panic and vulnerability among the Iraqis.

True or false, the stories failed. Across vast fields of sand and dirt and palm groves, I saw batteries of Sam-6 anti-aircraft missiles and multiple Katyusha rocket launchers awaiting the American advance. The soldiers around them looked relaxed, some smoking cigarettes in the shade of the palm trees or sipping fruit juice brought to them by the residents of Qadisiya whose homes – heaven help them – were now in the firing line.

But then there was the white-painted Japanese pick-up truck that pulled out in front of my car. At first, I thought the soldiers on the back were sleeping, covered in blankets to keep them warm. Yet I had opened my car window to keep cool this early summer morning and I realised that all the soldiers – there must have been 15 of them in the little truck – were lying on top of each other, all with their heavy black military boots dangling over the tailboard. The two soldiers on the vehicles sat with their feet wedged between the corpses. So did America’s first victims of the day go to their eternal rest.

“Today, we attack,” the Minister of Information, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf, was to announce an hour later, and he reeled off a list of Iraqi “victories” to sustain his country’s morale. Seven British and American tanks destroyed around Basra, four American personnel carriers and an American aircraft destroyed near Baghdad. At the airport, the Iraqis “confronted the enemy and slaughtered them”. Or so we were told.

Well, an Iraqi friend of mine who lives near the airport told me that he had seen a

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tank on fire, a tank with a black “V” sign painted on its armour. The “V” is the American symbol of “friendly force”, intended to warn their pilots from bombing their own soldiers by mistake. So this must have been an American tank.

But Mr Sahaf’s optimism got the better of him. Yes, he told journalists in Baghdad, Doura was safe, Qadisiya was safe. Yarmouk was safe. “Go and look for yourselves,” he challenged. Ministry of Information officials were ashen-faced. And when foreign correspondents were bussed off on this over-confident adventure, they were turned back at the Yarmouk hospital and the ministry buses firmly ordered to carry reporters back to their hotel.

But an earlier 35-minute journey around the shell-embraced suburbs proved one thing yesterday: that the Iraqis – up till dusk at least – were preparing to fight the invaders. I found their 155mm artillery around the centre of the city, close to the rail lines. One artillery piece was even hauled up Abu Nawas Street beside the Tigris by a truck whose soldiers held up their rifles and shouted their support for Saddam Hussein.

And all day, the air raids continued. It gets confusing, amid the dust and smoke, all these new targets and new pockets of ruination. Was the grey-powdered rubble in Karada a building yesterday, or was it struck last week? The central telephone exchange had taken another hit. So had the communications centre in Yarmouk. And then I noticed, along the front line where the Iraqi soldiers were preparing to become heroes or “martyrs” or survivors – the last an infinitely preferable outcome to the sanest of soldiers – how small craters had been punched into the flowerbeds on the central reservations.

Ever so slowly, the suburbs of Baghdad were being turned into battlefields. ♦