

# ‘Iraq will be a quagmire for the Americans’

*‘Our troops will not surrender’*

Iraq stunned the Americans and British last night by broadcasting video tape of captured and dead American troops – the nightmare of both George Bush and Tony Blair. The body of one American soldier was seen with a great red gash on his neck, while five US prisoners appeared on screen. One, a black female soldier, had been wounded, while a male serviceman said he had been “only following orders”.

The film will increase internal support for Saddam Hussein, because it will be regarded as proof that the American-British force will be beaten.

All day, Baghdad felt like Kuwait in 1991 after the Iraqis had set fire to the oil wells. The oil-filled trenches torched by the Iraqi army around Baghdad on Saturday are ablaze. And regardless of whether they really hinder the incoming American cruise missiles, they have placed this city under a sinister, dark canopy. The skyline is black, the sky grey. Only by looking directly upwards can you catch sight of the sun. The Tigris moves sluggishly under a dun-coloured mist. If the people of Baghdad could pretend, a few days ago, that the war did not exist, yesterday they were living in its shadow.

All day, you could hear the explosions. An echoing blast from the suburbs, the sound of jets and then another explosion and then – because war is like this – the gentle roar of traffic and the sight of a red double-decker bus making its routine journey across the river bridge to Qadamiya.

To grasp the realities – at least the strategic realities according to the Iraqis – you had to venture down to the villa where General Hazim al-Rawi of the Iraqi army was giving his morning press briefing, à la General Tommy Franks. In fact, General Rawi is

## **Robert Fisk » 'Iraq will be a quagmire for the Americans'**

promising us more press briefings than the US commander, a practice that will presumably continue until General Franks takes the surrender of General Rawi or – less likely perhaps – until General Rawi takes the surrender of General Franks.

“Iraq will become a quagmire for the Americans ... It is not true what your agencies have been saying that thousands of troops had surrendered.”

Thus did the Iraqi general try to rubbish the BBC's reports on Saturday of the taking of up to 6,000 prisoners from the Iraqi 51st Division. Then there came a familiar part of every Arab war: the claims of planes shot down.

“Our brave and heroic forces have shot down up to five fighters and two helicopters. One fighter was shot down near Baghdad, another near Mosul, a third at Akhtar Rashid, a fourth in the Taji district, another in Basra. A helicopter was shot down at Mosul, another in the Samara area.” As reporters like to say, there was no “independent confirmation” of these claims.

The Iraqi Information Minister was full of scorn for the war. “They call it shock and awe,” Mohamed Said al-Sahaff declared. “It seems it is they who are suffering from shock and awe.” There followed a long statement from the Vice-President, Taha Yassin Ramadan, much of which included a demand for the support of the “Arab masses”. There was cocky stuff, too, for the claims of Anglo-American advances on the ground from Mr Ramadan. “They say they ... have covered 160 or 180km. I would like to tell them to go 300km. But if they have any contact with any town or village, they will face the same fate as they are now facing at Umm Qasr. You will see on the television the destruction of their tanks.”

Mr Ramadan said the Americans would be welcome to try to come to Baghdad, because they would meet a similar fate. Last night's film will be taken by Iraqis to support his contention. ◆