

Early and late, the Air Force went downtown with swift, time-critical attacks.

The Baghdad Strikes

By Adam J. Hebert, Senior Editor

THE Air Force opened and closed Gulf War II with raids on time-critical Baghdad targets. On the first night, F-117 fighters attempted a decapitation strike. The final attempt occurred 18 days later, when a B-1B struck a suspected Saddam Hussein meeting place. This is the story of these book-end attacks.

In the early morning hours of March 20 (Baghdad time), planners at USAF's combined air operations center in Saudi Arabia had just finished a briefing on the probable course of the first night of the forthcoming air war. Then came word that Operation Iraqi Freedom would actually begin that night—and it would not be following the script.

The officers at the CAOC were told they needed to prepare a stealthy F-117 fighter to strike a bunker in downtown Baghdad.

The coalition air boss, Air Force Lt. Gen. T. Michael Moseley, told CAOC planners that he owed the President an answer to a question: "Could this mission be accomplished, and if so, what is the risk?" Air



Clockwise from upper left: (1) The first of the two F-117s that participated in the bunker strike returns to al Udeid AB, Qatar, the morning of March 20. (2) The second Nighthawk arrives moments later as an F-16 departs. (3) Weapons loaders in Southwest Asia equip a B-1B with a dozen 2,000-pound JDAMs and 1,000-pound "bunker busters." Left: A B-1B takes off from Andersen AFB, Guam, for an OIF mission.

USAF photo by SrA. Christina M. Rumsey

USAF photo by SSgt. Cherie A. Thurby



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Force Maj. Clint Hinote, one of the CAOC officers present, viewed the mission as “very high risk,” but informed Moseley that, in his opinion, it could be done.

Shortly after, a CAOC officer placed a call to mission planners at al Udeid AB, Qatar. The CAOC wanted to know how long it would take to get a pair of F-117s in position to strike a specific set of coordinates in downtown Baghdad. The goal was to complete the Baghdad strike before dawn, which was only a few hours away.

Up to that point, the F-117 pilots at al Udeid had been reviewing targets for the planned air war, but they dropped that task and quickly turned to the urgent mission at hand. Within 15 minutes, the al Udeid planners announced that, though the timelines were extremely tight, they could carry out the mission if Air Force maintainers could get two aircraft ready quickly.

What touched off the flurry was fresh intelligence that Saddam was holed up in a specific bunker for the

night. Planners had a rare opportunity to kill the elusive Iraqi leader. That might sink the regime even without war, they thought.

The Time Factor

The problem was that it would be dawn in about four hours. Standard F-117 mission preparation could take six hours. Then the Qatar-to-Baghdad flight would take more than two additional hours. So, under normal timelines, the F-117s, which have always gone to war at night, would be forced to fly over Iraq in broad daylight, creating unacceptable risk.

Obviously, both planning and mission preparation had to be compressed.

At about 1:30 a.m., planners selected two F-117s for the mission. They were to be piloted by Lt. Col. David F. Toomey III and Maj. Mark J. Hoehn. The mission was far from routine, and both aircraft would experience malfunctions on the way to Baghdad. However, a series of coincidences, hard work, and luck brought success minutes after dawn.

The first complication concerned the choice of weapon. Planners wanted the fighters to drop the best available munition, which was the EGBU-27 precision guided bomb. The problem was it had never been used in combat.

The EGBU-27 was unlike any of the fighter’s normal munitions. The “E” in the designation signified that these laser guided bombs had been enhanced with guidance from Global Positioning System satellites. Moreover, they were equipped with inertial navigation. Thus, each EGBU-27 could be guided to a precise location in three different ways.

However, the new guidance systems had arrived at al Udeid a mere 24 hours earlier.

In the most fortuitous coincidence imaginable, test officials back at Edwards AFB, Calif., just six hours earlier had certified that the F-117 was capable of delivering two of the new weapons simultaneously. Hoehn called the timing “dumb luck.”

Also lucky was the fact that maintenance teams that day had per



aircraft radios before takeoff, and a malfunction meant Hoehn had to fly silent because he had no secure communications capability. He was only able to talk while refueling over Iraq, when his F-117 connected to the KC-135's intercom. In this way, Hoehn verified that the mission was still on.

After tanking, the stealth fighters split up and took separate routes to the target area. The sun was starting to come up. "It was getting pretty light" by the time he reached Baghdad, Hoehn recalled. "I could see the outlines of houses and buildings."

The decision to use the new weapons proved critical. Standard GBU-27s offer pinpoint attack capability through their laser guidance, pro-

formed a significant amount of maintenance and other work that greatly shortened mission-preparation time. Ground crews had done low observable "prep work" on the fighters, getting much of the time-consuming stealth maintenance out of the way. Further, Air Force maintainers had already loaded two of the EGBUs onto one of the mission aircraft, "to do a show and tell," Hoehn said. This meant only one F-117 needed to have the new weapons loaded when the tasking came from the CAOC.

Combat preparation of the fighters began immediately. The plan called for the F-117s to take off as soon as possible. Hoehn said he was already sitting in the aircraft "as they tightened the last lugs" on his bombs. Less than three hours after the first CAOC call, the two stealth fighters roared northward into the nighttime sky. It was 3:38 a.m.

At this point, the pilots were hoping they would have adequate support from other coalition aircraft but did not know exactly what those aircraft might be. In fact, at departure, the Air Force had not assigned a specific tanker to the Nighthawks.

Desensitization

Hoehn and Toomey soon were thankful that Washington had, weeks earlier, dramatically intensified Operation Southern Watch, the enforcement of the "no-fly zone" over southern Iraq. Hinote said the increased air activity had desensitized the Iraqi air defense establishment to the presence of large numbers of American



At top, one of the F-117 mission aircraft lands at Al Udeid after the successful strike against the target in downtown Baghdad. Here, one of the deployed stealth fighters returns to Holloman AFB, N.M., on April 16. The silhouettes painted below the canopy represent 16 successful combat missions.

aircraft flying through its airspace.

In fact, said Hinote, more than 30 mission-support aircraft already were in the air by the time the F-117s took off. "This was not a cold start," he explained. The coalition had to launch only two EA-6B electronic warfare aircraft. All other mission aircraft were airborne.

Part of the game plan, Hinote said, was to move around large numbers of aircraft over Iraq to create "distractions" and allow the F-117s to slip into Baghdad unnoticed.

The hurried pace brought more complications, however. Officials did not have time to test the mission

viding accuracy superior to that offered by GPS guidance. On this morning, however, Baghdad was obscured under low-level clouds, which would have interfered with laser tracks. Thus, guidance had to come from satellite signals.

Each of the two F-117s released two bombs, which plummeted toward the bunker in which Saddam Hussein was believed to be sleeping. Release came at 5:30 a.m., 13 minutes after dawn but only five hours after the pilots first heard that such a mission might be in the offing.

The attack's swiftness, said Hoehn, was "unprecedented."

The strike caught Iraqi defenses completely off guard. Defensive anti-aircraft fire did not begin until the aircraft had completed the attack and were racing out of the Baghdad area.

Back at the CAOC, Hinote recalled, there was not much to do but wait and watch for confirmation that the attack had taken place. There was much uncertainty about the mission, he said, most notably because it was not known if the Iraqi air defenders would be awake and alert. As he noted, "It could have been very difficult had [the Iraqis] done things differently."

The first indication the F-117s had successfully reached their target came from the UK's Sky News, which reported massive explosions in the Iraqi capital.

Free-For-All Flight

Hoehn said the flight back to base was "pretty much a free-for-all." The Nighthawks were instructed to join up with any tankers they could find. Hoehn and Toomey did so, touching down at al Udeid 4.5 hours after takeoff.

Air Force officers did not know then and do not know even now if they succeeded in decapitating the Saddam regime. They do know the strike allowed the coalition to seize the initiative, which it never relinquished.

"We knocked that regime off balance, and we kept them off balance," Hoehn said. "Whether or not we got

[Saddam], he was never a significant factor after that," Hinote added.

It is also true that the EGBU-27 immediately became the F-117's premier weapon. According to Air Force data, 98 of them were delivered during the conflict, compared to only 11 of the traditional, predominantly laser versions.

Less than three weeks later, on April 7, coalition air planners got another "pop-up" opportunity. Intelligence sources on the ground in Baghdad reported that Saddam Hussein was seen entering a restaurant with other top leadership officials. If bombs could be put on the target quickly enough, they might be killed.

It might have been the actual Saddam, or it might have been one of his many doubles. Or perhaps it was neither. Whatever the reality, attack planning began.

Just 47 minutes after the tip was received, the explosions of four satellite guided bombs obliterated the target area. This mission could have been completed in even less time, according to officials; they say most of the 47 minutes was consumed in the discussion about whether or not to attack.

After officials made the "go" decision, it took the B-1 crew only 12 minutes to do the job.

The bomber, nicknamed *Search and Destroy*, had just come off a tanker and was flying over western Iraq when a call came in from an

orbiting E-3 AWACS aircraft. The AWACS battle manager on the line said a critical target had to be destroyed. He added that this particular leadership target was "the big one."

The Right Stuff

This was the type of operation for which the fast, long-duration, heavy-punching B-1B was ideally suited, said Col. James M. Kowalski, commander of the 405th Expeditionary Wing hosting all 11 Lancers in the theater. During the conflict, a B-1 was in the air over western Iraq at all times, ready to strike emerging targets. Meanwhile, another bomber would be returning to base, with a third en route to the "orbit" area.

In an interview, Kowalski described the continuous in-out shuffling of bombers as a "synchronized ballet," adding that the constant presence of B-1s armed with 48,000 pounds of guided weapons created a "suffocating presence" over Iraq. Thwarting the launch of ballistic missiles was the primary B-1 mission.

The speed, range, and payload of the B-1 Lancers made it possible for these bombers to act as "roving linebackers" over Iraq, said Kowalski. During the war, only 36 percent of the B-1 targets were preplanned and included in the air tasking order. The other two-thirds were assigned later, frequently hit by a bomber that was returning to base.

On the day of the B-1 raid, it took 35 minutes for the critical intelligence tip to reach the Lancer's crew. In that time, the information went to the CAOC, on to the National Imagery and Mapping Agency for development of coordinates, then back to the Gulf, where the B-1 was selected as the best asset to do the job. Finally, the targeting information was forwarded to the E-3 for tasking.

Things were progressing quickly in Gulf War II. By April 7, US aircraft were operating over Baghdad with impunity. US forces had already moved into the capital city. Air supremacy had been declared over all of Iraq the day before. And B-1 crews had grown accustomed to their role of providing persistent, on-call firepower.

Although the danger from enemy air defenses over Iraq was never fully

USAF photo



The crew of the B-1 *Search and Destroy*. From left: Capt. Chris Wachter, aircraft commander; Capt. Sloan Hollis, pilot; Lt. Col. Fred Swan, weapons systems officer; and 1st Lt. Joe Runci, WSO.

eliminated, Capt. Chris Wachter, the B-1's pilot, said enemy defenses were not always a threat. "I've flown on missions that have gone right over the heart of Baghdad, where [there are air defense] threats, and seen absolutely nothing—no one's shooting at me," Wachter told reporters. "Other times, it's kind of nonstop," he added.

For operations such as this one, a B-1 would be assisted by a comprehensive strike package. Officials say typical supporting aircraft would include an EA-6B Prowler to jam enemy air defenses, two F-16CJs to destroy enemy radar and missile sites, one E-3 AWACS battle management aircraft, and a tanker.

"We'd heard that sort of thing be-



USAF photo by SSgt. Jessica Kochman



USAF photo by SSgt. Cherie A. Thurby

Top: A weapons loader prepares a GBU-31 JDAM for installation aboard a B-1B. Above: The B-1 was ideally suited for striking emerging targets in Iraq because of its heavy payload, long loiter time, and speed. The Bones deployed for Gulf War II stayed in the air around the clock and demonstrated a 79.4 percent mission capable rate.

fore," Kowalski said about the "big one" tasking, and high-priority targets were something the crews took in stride.

A Different Feel

Still, attacking a priority leadership target isn't like attacking an ammunition dump. It has a different feel to it. "We understand the situation," Lt. Col. Fred Swan, a weapons systems officer, told reporters. "It's not like you're some detached being up there just throwing weapons out." He said the crew members can hear the stress in

voices, and "there's a lot of thought going into what you're doing [and for] the safety of people on the ground."

Officials explained that two of the weapons used in the attack were Joint Direct Attack Munition GBU-31s with hard-target penetrators that burrow into the ground before detonating. The other two JDAMs were GBU-31s with 25-millisecond delay fuses, which followed the "bunker busters" into the crater.

Kowalski noted that use of the penetrating warhead effectively cuts the explosive weight of a weapon in

half; thus, a 2,000-pound bomb becomes a 1,000-pound-class bomb. This is "a little more useful for the planners when they look into a dense environment," such as the residential neighborhood targeted in this raid.

Kowalski said the ability to hit a target with such swiftness put the Air Force inside the enemy's decision loop, meaning USAF could act faster than the enemy could react. When an aircraft can lay precision bombs on a leadership target in just 12 minutes, "they're defenseless," he said.

In addition, said Kowalski, the B-1B's crew could have shaved the elapsed time by another six minutes had the target in question been considered "fleeting" and the bomber flown to Baghdad at max speed. As it was, said Swan, the supersonic B-1 headed to the target at subsonic speed, and only "a couple" of minutes were needed to program the coordinates into the weapons.

The Lancer continued its sortie after destroying the target area. It flew on to Tikrit in northern Iraq, hit a surface-to-air missile site, and struck an airfield during its 10.5-hour sortie.

It was unclear whether either the March 20 or April 7 strike had succeeded in ending the life of a vicious dictator. However, the world has received no incontrovertible proof of Saddam's existence since the first attack. If he is alive, he certainly is not advertising the fact—or his location. ■